

Challenges for the International System

Transatlantic relations and the US Presidential election

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Transatlantic relations have undergone a number of different stages in the course of history. The Barack Obama period will certainly be remembered as one of relatively harmonious cooperation, especially when compared to the administration of George W. Bush. Reflecting on the importance of the transatlantic partnership, US Secretary of State John Kerry considered it ‘absolutely indispensable to global security and prosperity’ during a talk he recently gave at a German Marshall Fund event in Brussels.¹ However, the forthcoming US presidential election of 8 November 2016 has generated a fruitful debate on whether continuity or discontinuity will mark the coming years. Although transatlantic relations will no doubt be met with difficult challenges irrespective of the result, a potential victory for Donald Trump is widely considered to be a synonym for discontinuity and might seriously affect the transatlantic partnership.

A new study conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) shows that Hillary Clinton is the preferred candidate in all EU countries with the exception of Hungary.² The result outlines the general European preoccupation with stability and continuity as well as the expectation that the US will enhance its role as a provider of security in the Old Continent. This political position is reflected in European public opinion. A June Pew Research Poll demonstrates that most Europeans look favorably on both Obama and Clinton but not Trump. In particular, 77 percent of respondents express confidence in the current US President, 59 percent in the nominee for the Democratic Party and 9 percent in the candidate for the Republican Party.³ Although Clinton’s ratings are lower than those of Obama, they are overwhelmingly higher than those of Trump.

Trump and Europe

Even before his specific references to Europe are examined, Trump’s lack of experience in dealing with politics and his atypical personality are enough to cause high concern. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel does

not want to publicly intervene and sees ‘no nightmares’⁴, French President François Hollande is vocal. He warns of ‘consequences’ if the American people choose Trump.⁵ Furthermore, the Republican nominee has had difficulty cooperating harmoniously with some European politicians. His public dispute with the newly elected London Mayor Sadiq Khan is indicative of this.⁶ In that regard, Trump’s plan for a temporary ban on Muslims entering the US also raises questions as to whether he will show solidarity with Europe’s attempt to tackle the refugee crisis or push towards further polarization.⁷

As far as his public rhetoric is concerned, Trump does not seem to count on Europe or value its role in the world. His April 2016 foreign policy speech offers useful insights into his position in this respect.⁸ To start with, the Republican nominee joined the debate on Brexit before the UK referendum of 23 June, suggesting that he ‘would probably want to go back to a different system’ if he were from Britain.⁹ After the result was announced, he hailed Brexit as a ‘great victory’ and drew a parallel between the US and the UK as in both countries numerous citizens want ‘to take their country back and have independence in a sense’.¹⁰ Obviously, Trump does not see the UK withdrawal from the EU as a catalyst for further European integration but as a serious blow for the cohesion of the Union.

Moreover, Trump champions the idea of a type of modern isolationism in foreign affairs which will impact on the relations between the US and its traditional allies. This modern isolationism does not only concern the EU as it also refers to Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea but it certainly constitutes a warning signal for the future course of the transatlantic partnership. Specifically, the Republican nominee might jeopardize the standard security guarantees provided by the American administration to Europe by calling NATO an ‘obsolete and expensive’ organization.¹¹ If he insists on putting into practice his position that US partners should increase their defence budgets and not necessarily count on Washington’s economic support, he will reject the cornerstone of global security after World War II.¹²

As a response to Trump’s argumentation, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said that the Alliance ‘is not a result of the US presidential campaign’.¹³ Nevertheless, the main challenge for the EU is not to criticise the Republican nominee but rather examine whether it can find funding alternatives. The Franco-German plan for closer defence cooperation is an example.¹⁴ On the same wave-length, Daniel Fiott argues in

Survival that the EU might indeed be able to help with its financial mechanism, especially in contributing to the potential deployment of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF).¹⁵ Such a scenario cannot be easily implemented of course. That is because rules stipulate that the EU budget should be invested only in civilian projects or in initiatives with a dual-use capability that would serve civilian and military goals.¹⁶

With reference to economics and globalisation, Trump opposes free trade deals as a matter of principle. Once again, his opposition does not specifically target Europe – as he also speaks out against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership – but unavoidably includes it. It is unfair for the Republican nominee to take the full blame for a possible failure of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) but his presidency will almost certainly bury this ambitious plan for good. As CNN has reported, a presidency under this eccentric leader 'could be the final nail in the coffin for President Obama's big free trade deal with Europe.'¹⁷

Clinton and Europe

In contrast to the scenario of uncertainty following a potential Trump victory, a Clinton presidency is unlikely to push the transatlantic relationship towards a painful reset. Senior Adviser at the Center for a New American Security, Patrick Cronin, argues in *Politico* that 'she'll be stronger on the transatlantic relationship than Obama was initially'.¹⁸ As Secretary of State Clinton made more than fifty visits to European countries, forging numerous relationships with leaders and diplomats in the Old Continent.¹⁹ This experience could play a constructive role for her policy vis-à-vis the EU and generates optimism in Europe for her future initiatives.

Clinton supported a 'Bremain' vote in the UK referendum of 23 June. Specifically, in a statement to *The Observer*, her Senior Policy Adviser, Jake Sullivan, asserted that the nominee for the Democratic Party 'values a strong British voice in the EU'.²⁰ Almost immediately after the Brexit vote Clinton expressed her respect for the choice of the British people but also 'America's steadfast commitment to the special relationship with Britain and the transatlantic alliance with Europe'.²¹ On these grounds, it becomes evident that – as a US President – Clinton will foster closer collaboration with the EU as it would be 'dangerous and foolish' for Washington to turn its back on Europe.²² As Joerg Wolf puts it, Clinton has

been much more supportive of NATO and Europe than all the other presidential candidates during the primaries.²³ This approach mirrors her strong anti-Russian stance and contradicts Trump's promise to engage himself in a personal diplomacy with President Vladimir Putin.

Clinton, however, is not particularly satisfied with Europe's performance in the fight against terrorism. From November 2015 she made it clear that 'European countries should have the flexibility to enhance their border controls when circumstances warrant'.²⁴ A few months later, in March 2016, she went further in a speech she gave at Stanford University. She encouraged the EU to do more in order to share the burden with the US.²⁵ This position could imply that Clinton might push European countries to invest more in defence and security, principally Germany.²⁶ Subsequently, a Clinton presidency 'could usher in a new era of deepening engagement and cooperation, especially military-to-military'.²⁷ For Europe to respond in practice to such a call will constitute a challenge. But the main difference from a presidency under Trump is that –under Clinton – this response will have to be given in an orderly way and not amid questions on NATO's future role and America's commitment to its future operation.

Last but not least, Clinton's stance on TTIP is not clear. In 2012 she hailed this transatlantic initiative regarding it an 'economic NATO'.²⁸ Nonetheless, during the pre-election campaign she has given the impression of not being able to resist Trump's anti-globalisation rhetoric and defend TTIP. Subsequently, she voiced serious criticism against it, promising to stop all trade deals jeopardizing American job positions, including TPP.²⁹ There are scholars such as Julia Gray, who attribute Clinton's alleged U-turn to her will to attract more voters, and believe that the transatlantic trade policy is not, therefore, under serious threat.³⁰ Even if this is the case, Clinton will almost immediately suffer a dent to her credibility, should she reembrace her 2012 rhetoric after the US presidential election.

A Way Forward

Looking towards the future, the EU needs to be prepared for two different scenarios. The first is that of discontinuity and possibly a fresh crisis in transatlantic relations, if Trump wins. And the second is that of continuity but with some critical changes, if Clinton becomes the next US President. Jeremy Shapiro nicely presents the way forward for Europe by seeing ei-

ther an existential or an everyday challenge accordingly. He also recommends that Brussels should begin to take more responsibility for its own defence and build resilience.³¹ Lessons from history suggest a rather cautious stance but the Franco-German commitment to bringing the Union forward and strengthening it after Brexit could now be a springboard.

According to conventional wisdom the scenario of discontinuity and a fresh crisis in transatlantic relations might be averted by Trump's hypothetical adjustment to reality. It is not a rare phenomenon for politicians to invest in populism or different ideas during pre-election periods and to exercise a more orthodox policy after they assume power. Trump has already started to reconsider or reformulate some of his controversial public remarks made in speeches and interviews. Nevertheless, such an adjustment cannot be taken for granted. A billionaire winning the US presidency due to his atypical political communication could be prepared to stick to some of his pre-election arguments and make changes. The system of checks and balances in the country imposes limitations on every president but cannot prevent them from adding their personal stamp to foreign policy and other issues.

From another perspective, the policies of the new US President vis-à-vis Europe may also have a significant impact on the image of the latter in America in a period during which Euroscepticism is on the rise. Recent opinion poll data of the Pew Research Center show that although Americans still consider Europe as important, they do not necessarily disagree with Trump's foreign policy vis-à-vis NATO and the EU. Specifically, while 52 percent regard Europe as focal point in US foreign policy and 77 percent say being a member of NATO is good for their country, 37 percent argue that this is more important to its other member states and only 15 percent to the US. Additionally, only half of the public, 52 percent, believe that US ties with Europe are most important with the percentage of young adults lower than this.³² Bruce Stokes, Director of global economic attitudes at the Pew Research Center, describes this in *Politico* as a 'grim reminder that Europhiles could be a dying breed in the US.'³³

Finally, having briefly presented the debate on the potential impact of the US presidential election result on transatlantic relations, a reference to the specific characteristics of the current era is required. In recent years, especially after the outbreak of the financial crisis in both the US and the EU, the attempt by several analysts as well as polling organisations to anticipate political developments and predict public opinion shifts has not been encouraging. It is therefore particularly risky to make safe assump-

tions. All in all, the future course of transatlantic relations does not only depend on the way Trump or Clinton will implement their approach to Europe but also on the implementation of their foreign policies overall. The character of the US presidential election is global. This means that Trump's or Clinton's policies vis-à-vis Russia, China, the Middle East etc. will impact on Europe either directly or indirectly. The EU should not be caught by surprise if it will soon have to make decisions on thorny issues relevant to the unpredictable evolution of US-Russian and Sino-American relations.

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